

## Book Review

**Mícheál Hoyne, *Fuidheall Áir: Bardic Poems on the Meic Dhiarmada of Magh Luirg c. 1377–1637*, Early Modern Irish Texts Series I (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2018). Print, 489pp., €25, ISBN: 9781855002388.**



*Review*

Mícheál Hoyne's *Fuidheall Áir* is a collection of nine Bardic poems dedicated to the Mac Diarmada family of Magh Luirg (Moylurg), in modern-day Roscommon, that have 'survived the battle' (p. 27). It covers three centuries of the family's history and the poems were composed by various Connacht-based poets. This book will appeal to the historian, philologist, Celticist, literary scholar and (well-)informed general reader alike. It is an exemplary publication, in which Hoyne combines textual criticism with a thorough historical analysis of the poems, the context of their composition, and their poets and honorands. Readers will appreciate that, not only does Hoyne provide a comprehensive set of notes to each of the nine poems, but he also translates the material, making it accessible to a wide range of scholars. Indeed, this monograph will not look out of place on the shelf next to James Carney's *Poems on the Butlers* (1945) and David Greene's *Duanaire Mhéig Uidhir* (1972).

The Introduction gives a historical background of the Meic Dhiarmada, bringing into focus how they emerged, their political power, and their geographical relationship to other prominent families. Here the author also discusses the patronage of Bardic poetry (pp. 16-17), reintroducing the concept of 'diplomacy by verse' discussed in his article '*Imtheacht an Dá Nónmhar agus Tóraigheacht Taise Taoibhghile*: an Early Modern Irish exemplary tale' (*Ériu* 65 (2015), pp. 1–47; see pp. 33–42). As it is central to interpreting the contents of this collection of poems, Hoyne

outlines the political activity of individual members of the Meic Dhiarmada and provides the reader with a useful genealogical tree (p. 19), as well as a comprehensive discussion of the annalistic records of certain members' largesse towards poets. Importantly, Hoyne addresses the role of women as patrons and part of the culture in which Bardic poetry was produced (pp. 21–2) – this, along with the history of women more generally in medieval Ireland, is so often overlooked. Hoyne gives a balanced assessment of the survival of this praise poetry, including the factors that contributed to their survival, while explaining the broader use of the poems historically for the study of prosody and grammar.

Each of the nine poems (numbered Poem 1–9 in the book) is prefaced with an introduction about the poem and presented systematically to the reader in the following order: manuscript witnesses, poet, honorand, message, date of composition and metre (p. 27). The text and translation are presented in a user-friendly format, suited both to the classroom and private reading, with the edition on the left, translation on the right, and manuscript readings in footnotes. Following Poems 1–9 are Textual Notes to each of the poems, followed by a Bibliography and Indexes to the Poems; these include an Index of Proper Names, and Index of Poetical Names for Ireland, and an Index of Words and Phrases Discussed in the Textual Notes. In all, the book's layout is intuitive.

Anyone who has ever attempted to translate Bardic poetry will appreciate the deftness with which Hoyne handles the subject matter, as his translations faithfully reproduce the sense of the poems in English while avoiding the obfuscation that literal translations yield. Take, for example, verse 47 of Poem 1 celebrating Aodh Mac Diarmada: *Lámh is gairbhe ar ghort troda / lámh míolla Meic Dhiarmada, | lámh is bog um brat 's um boin, / glac nár ob dán ná deabhoidh* 'The gentle hand of Mac Diarmada is the hand that is fiercest on the battle-field, a hand that freely gives away a cloak and a cow, a hand that never refused a poem or battle' (pp. 64, 65). Later in Poem 5, Hoyne

captures the emotionality of the poet, whose praise extends to a deep admiration of his honorand, the sixteenth-century ruler Conchobhar Mac Diarmada, during a turbulent political period. In his translations, the author retains a smattering of Irish words and phrases that bear no direct equivalent in English, require further commentary or whose essence would be compromised in the process of translation (e.g. *cró catha*, p. 91; *giolla Dé*, p. 95). However, these retentions from the source-text are given due attention, explanations and translations in the author's Textual Notes (for the examples *cró catha* and *giolla Dé*, see pp. 319, 326 respectively).

One of the many commendable features of this publication is Hoyne's consistent adherence to his editorial policy, which he sets out clearly in the Introduction (pp. 27–9). He takes a 'copy-text' approach to the critical edition, avails of intervention conservatively, and provides manuscript readings when he reverts to silent normalisation of the text. There are significant benefits to this approach: the edited text serves as an exemplum for scholars interested in textual criticism with relation to the poetry of the Early Modern Irish period, while the manuscript readings permit the reader to study the vagaries of the language and the differences between manuscript witnesses. A thorough commentary on the language, editorial choices, and further contextualising information is presented in the extensive Textual Notes (pp. 295–456). A sample of the author's high level of editorial transparency may be found in the preface to Poem 3, in which he explains how he deviates from the manuscript presentation by dividing the poem into thematic sections (p. 133). Comments such as these allow the discerning reader to assess the material while being made fully aware of all manner of editorial interventions.

This publication succeeds in highlighting several issues worthy of the historian's attention, such as the cultural role of Bardic poetry and the wealth of detailed information that it can offer on the lives of people in late medieval Ireland. For example, we are given an insightful commentary

on the mores of fifteenth-century Ireland by the poet Duibhgeann Ó Duibhgeannáin in the prose section of the *crosántacht* (a composition of prose and verse) in Poem 2. There the poet expresses his disapproval (which, as Hoyne asserts, is most likely that of his honorand) of the indecent actions of a priest towards an anchoress (pp. 110, 111). This is, as Hoyne rightly points out in his interpretation of the anecdote, unsurprising given the ‘renewal of religious fervour and reform’ during the period of the poem’s composition (p. 85). In the same poem, there is an allusion to Tomaltach Mac Diarmada’s participation in raids against the colonies in Meath and Westmeath, which is otherwise undocumented (p. 78–9).

This collection of poems maps the training in, and production and reception of, Bardic poetry from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century: for example, Poem 4, gives us a glimpse into the level of learning among nobles in late medieval Ireland with the mention of Brian Mac Diarmada’s erudition on two occasions (as discussed by Hoyne at p. 162 and featured in verses 9 and 28). The final poem in the collection, Poem 9, offers a first-hand perspective from the poet Muiris Ó Maoil Chonaire on the decline of the Bardic order and the concomitant loss of learning in the art of Bardic poetry in seventeenth-century Ireland (see verses 57, 65–7).

Poem 6 features expressions of praise towards a woman, the wife of Brian Óg Mac Diarmada, which feeds into the question of women as the subject, as well as patrons, of Bardic poetry (verses 35 and 36, pp. 234–7). Indeed, to this a number of references to patronage by women, and women as readers or recipients of literature, during the Early Modern Irish period may be added: in the manuscript Brussels MS No. 4190, we find a scribal note on f. 263v revealing that the manuscript was written by Sioghraidh Ó Maoil Chonaire for Róise, the daughter of Aodh Dubh; and we know that part of the sixteenth-century *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (RIA MS 24 P 25), the so-called ‘Book of Piety’ taking up ff. 1–65, was written for the Donegal noblewoman Máire Ní

Mháille. At the end of *Cath Finntrágha* ‘The Battle of Ventry’ in Rawlinson B 487, f. 11a, there is a scribal note explaining that it was written for Sadhbh, daughter of Tadhg Ó Máille.

Mícheál Hoyne marries a keen understanding of annalistic records and fiants, the Irish literary tradition and the family’s political history with astute interpretations of the poems’ contents (e.g. p. 130). The contention for supremacy over Magh Luirg recurs throughout the poetry and provides us with important information about the political activities of the Mac Diarmada family (see, for example, p. 123, 3.3). Poem 3 demonstrates how Bardic poetry can shed light on lesser-known historical figures: for example, Cathal Mac Diarmada, who, apart from his obit, does not feature in the annals (p. 125, see also note 104). Cathal Mac Diarmada’s participation in a battle in 1474 between Ó Conchobhair Donn and Ó Ceallaigh, mentioned in this poem, is similarly not documented elsewhere (p. 130).

Overall, *Fuidheall Áir* is essential reading and a timely publication, given the rising scholarly interest in Bardic poetry and the language of late medieval Ireland: e.g. Damian McManus’ and Eoghan Ó Raghallaigh’s *A Bardic Miscellany* (2010); Eoin Mac Cárthaigh’s *The Art of Bardic Poetry* (2014); Gordon Ó Riain’s *Dá dTrián Feasa Fiafraighidh* (2017), which contains a number of contributions on Early Modern Irish literature and language; the Early Modern Irish online project Léam (<https://xn--lamh-bpa.org/>); and the Historical Irish Corpus online (<http://corpas.ria.ie/>). It builds on the work of the aforementioned Trinity College Dublin scholars, as well as that of Pádraig A. Breatnach, and Katharine Simms, whose *Bardic Poetry Database* (<https://bardic.celt.dias.ie/>) remains an important resource to the scholar of Bardic poetry. This book is not only an homage to Bardic poetry but to scholarly excellence, and I eagerly await Mícheál Hoyne’s next monograph on the Seifín *duanaire*.

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